



A Supervisory Newsletter from the Employee Advisory Service

THE FRONTLINE SUPERVISOR

Helping You Manage Your Company's Most Valuable Resource – Employees

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Web: <http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

■ Q. The 9-11 anniversary is upon us, and some of my employees are anxious about it, while others seem less sensitive to it. With all the other stressors on state employees already, I'm concerned that the anxious employees may be misunderstood, and thus treated insensitively by other employees in the workgroup. Do you have any suggestions for helping to manage office stress around this anniversary?

A. Employees respond to stress in different ways, depending on other factors unique to them. Insensitivity to coworkers may actually be a signal that the person is trying to cope with his own fears. The best approach to addressing this is to encourage open discussion. In a staff meeting, take a few minutes to acknowledge the 9-11 anniversary and the other stressors that may be affecting your staff. Note that personal issues, such as recent deaths or illnesses of coworkers or family members, contribute to the level of stress people experience, making it different for each of us. Make a firm statement that teasing or joking will not be tolerated, rather that it is important, to be supportive, and it is appropriate to talk about such concerns. Breaks or lunch hours may offer opportunities to plan open discussions. Remember to refer an employee to EAS who does not appear to be coping well with stress. There is help for those severely impacted.

■ Q. My employee is a workaholic. I think she needs EAS to help her with her compulsive personality and work addiction. I am worried about the negative effect of her behavior on others, but I don't want to kill her spirit by confronting her. How do I proceed?

A. You can intervene with your employee's problematic work style without dampening her enthusiasm by focusing on the effects of specific behaviors that affect others. If your corrective interviews with her are unproductive, consider a referral to EAS. You appear to be focused on her diagnosis and mental health needs rather than behavior and work issues. Such an approach will undermine correcting her performance. Consider whether any of the following performance issues exist that are often associated with compulsive workers: procrastination, disorganization, inability to compromise with others, inefficient work behaviors, disrupted coworker relationships, rigid thinking, increased errors, impulsive decision making, or problems with boundaries in the office (intrusions, interruptions, emotional outbursts, respecting others' personal property and private space).

■ Q. An employee I supervise is a tremendous gossip. The negative effect of his private conversations on morale concerns me. Is it appropriate to refer him to EAS? How do I document the behavior if I don't witness it?

A. Malicious gossip, rumors, and hearsay can be a destructive force within a work unit or organization. It is natural for supervisors to be concerned about it and its effect on morale. If you do not overhear the gossip, you must rely upon the complaints of others before intervening. The evidence that gossip contributes to morale problems within your workplace may be difficult to measure because its effects may not be clearly or readily seen. However, if employees complain and are offended, corrective action becomes your responsibility. Direct your attention to behavior you would like changed, but do not label an employee a gossip. Since two people must engage in gossip for it to exist, make it known to employees what standards of civility you expect in the workplace. After correcting your employee, consider an EAS referral if change is not forthcoming. EAS may discover other issues or needs that give rise to his behavior.

■ Q. My employee entered treatment for a drug problem the day before a notice of termination was to be issued. Reportedly, he told coworkers it was to avoid termination. I have put the action on hold, but predict he won't change. What's the chance I will be right?

A. If your employee was insincere upon admission, it does not mean that he will not become sincere after admission. Most persons enter treatment to satisfy the demands of others or to avoid the consequences of failure to do so. Courts, spouses, doctors, friends, and employers all play key roles in pressuring chemically dependent persons into treatment. Successful treatment will return to you a renewed, valuable worker. Experience shows that the reason for an employee's admission cannot predict the outcome of treatment. Last-minute decisions to enter treatment are commonly made to avoid the consequences of alcohol- or drug-related life problems. Your organization's decision to hold the job action in abeyance is an appropriate move. This is a powerful time-tested way of helping a chemically dependent worker remain motivated and bounce back as a recovering person. With effective treatment, follow-up, a supervisor referral to EAS (if one has not been made), and a contract between you and your employee for satisfactory performance, salvaging this worker is more than likely.

■ Q. I referred an employee to EAS but was told by the employee he had not agreed to the EAS recommendations. Still, his job performance has improved. Why the change if he didn't do what EAS suggested?

A. There are several possibilities to explain the successful outcome (improved productivity) of the supervisor referral you made to EAS. 1) Your employee may be practicing better self-control over the symptoms of the personal problem that contributed to the unsatisfactory performance. 2) Your employee may have participated in the EAS recommendations without telling you, or in some other form of help that was not recommended by the EAS Professional. 3) The problem identified by EAS no longer exists. Whatever the reason for the employee's improved performance, the EAS referral worked as a service to him and a tool for improving productivity within your organization. If the problem reoccurs, refer him to EAS once again.

NOTES:

Visit EAS on our website at:
<http://hr.dop.wa.gov/eas.html>

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Information contained in The FrontLine Supervisor is for general information purposes only and is not intended to be specific guidance for any particular supervisor or human resource management concern. For specific guidance on handling individual employee problems, consult with your EAS Professional.
